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## The Face of Beatrice Cenci

The twenty-two year old Beatrice Cenci, having been involuntarily confined and possibly sexually assaulted by her father Francesco, conspired with her stepmother Lucrezia and her brother Giacomo to have Francesco murdered, was found guilty and later executed in Rome, on September 11, 1599. For most of the nineteenth century it was believed that Guido Reni had painted Beatrice Cenci's portrait on the eve of her execution. In fact, the portrait in question, 'one of the most famous attractions of Rome', is not by Guido Reni, and does not represent Beatrice Cenci.<sup>(1)</sup> The misattribution may offer us an awkward lesson in how we encounter pictures, one famously spelt out by Mark Twain:

A good legible label is usually worth, for information, a ton of significant attitude and expression in a historical picture. In Rome, people with fine sympathetic natures stand up and weep in front of the celebrated "Beatrice Cenci the Day before her Execution". It shows what a label can do. If they did not know the picture, they would inspect it unmoved, and say, "Young girl with hay fever; young girl with her head in a bag".<sup>(2)</sup>

'Deprive her of her melancholy situation', wrote Hippolyte Taine, 'and nothing remains but an amiable young lady'.<sup>(3)</sup> Knowledge of the 'situation' could even, it seems, determine the colours of the painting, if we take Shelley's insistence that Beatrice has golden hair, and Melville's description of her as 'seraphically *blonde*', as the expression of a preference, rather than as accurate observation. (Her hair is coppery brown.)<sup>(4)</sup> Equally, though, we might ask how these sympathetic natures would have responded to the Cenci story had they not known the picture? 'The History is written in the painting', Charles Dickens declared: 'written, in the dying girl's face, by Nature's own hand'.<sup>(5)</sup> If this is a mistake, it points to the ways in which the encounter with a pictorial representation might shape our understanding of an historical narrative; how a picture is sometimes able to broaden and deepen - to humanize perhaps - the moral interpretation we bring to a history. Beatrice Cenci's face as painted by Guido Reni seemed to throw light upon the Cenci story by illustrating a certain type of sorrowful

suffering, which it might otherwise have been difficult to conceive. The preconception, in other words, worked both ways.

In fact, no other conjunction of story and picture had stimulated such anxious meditation among literary visitors to Rome. Shelley possessed a copy of the portrait that had been ‘instantly recognised’ by his Italian servant, and he wondered at the ‘deep and breathless interest’ the story still awakened among the people there. He described it thus:

The portrait of Beatrice Cenci at the Colonna Palace is admirable as a work of art: it was taken by Guido during her confinement in prison... There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features: she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of her gentleness. Her head is bound with folds of white drapery from which the yellow strings of her golden hair escape, and fall about her neck. The moulding of the face is exquisitely delicate; the eyebrows are distinct and arched: the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish. Her forehead is large and clear; her eyes, which we are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lustreless, but beautifully tender and serene. In the whole mien there is a simplicity and dignity which united with her exquisite loveliness and deep sorrow are inexpressibly pathetic... <sup>(6)</sup>

Melville, too, would comment upon the ‘expression of suffering about the mouth – (appealing look of innocence) not caught in any copy or engraving’.<sup>(7)</sup> But there was more than stoic or pathetic resistance there; something about the portrait suggested a larger mystery that had suddenly become visible – visible, that is to say, in its mystery. In this respect the Cenci portrait seemed to haunt the observer as if it were a portrait from nineteenth-century Gothic fiction. Beatrice’s face would play a role in novels that drew upon the conventions of that genre, most famously in Melville’s *Pierre or The Ambiguities* (1852), and in Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* (1860). Her portrait suggested the interrupted, suspended moment in which a secret emerges into the light. In Stendhal’s words, she had

the ‘astonished air of someone who happens to be surprised at the moment of weeping warm tears’, half-turning, repeatedly meeting the nineteenth century observer with the same effect.<sup>(8)</sup> It was as if the male literary sensibility felt compelled to believe that it was the first to surprise Beatrice from her place of solitude. Dickens had even fantasised a genesis of the portrait in the moment when Guido looked into Beatrice’s face from a crowd of onlookers as she marched to the scaffold (replaying Dante’s first encounter with his own Beatrice): ‘I am willing to believe that, as you see her on the canvas, *so she turned towards him*, in the crowd, from the first sight of the axe, and stamped upon his mind a look which he has stamped upon mine as though I had stood beside him in the concourse.’[ my italics]:

Through the transcendent sweetness and beauty of the face, there is something shining out, that haunts me... She has suddenly turned towards you; and there is an expression in the eyes – though they are very tender and gentle – as if the wildness of a momentary terror, or distraction, had been struggled with and overcome, that instant; and nothing but a celestial hope, and a beautiful sorrow, and a desolate earthly helplessness remained.<sup>(9)</sup>

What recurs in these prose *ekphrases* is the perception of a light shining out of her countenance, a *chiaroscuro* effect of radiance thrown into greater relief by a dark background. This was both a technical appraisal of the painting, and a moral interpretation of the face. De Quincey had reacted similarly:

The same fine relief, the same light shining in darkness, arises here from the touching beauty of Beatrice, from her noble aspirations after deliverance, from the remorse which reaches her in the midst of real innocence, from her meekness, and from the depth of her inexpressible affliction. Even the murder, even the parricide, though proceeding from herself, do but deepen that background of darkness, which throws into fuller revelation the glory of that suffering face as immortalised by Guido.<sup>(10)</sup>

What did De Quincey mean by ‘real innocence’? And how, exactly, could Beatrice’s parricide be conceived as providing a darkness against which a ‘glory’ was thrown into ‘fuller revelation’ – how,

in other words, is pictorial *chiaroscuro* translated into the terms of a moral or theological argument in which a victory over evil is claimed? This chapter will explore exactly what is at stake in this translation process, and how it is fundamental to the encounter of word and image.

Shelley's analysis of the kind of interest provoked by the painting and its conjoining story had been astute:

It is in the restless anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification; it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge; that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists.<sup>(11)</sup>

The dedication of *The Cenci* (1819) to Leigh Hunt had described Hunt as a person of 'exalted toleration for all who do and think evil'.<sup>(12)</sup> The implication of this striking statement is that Hunt would be the kind of person who would seek some sort of emollient understanding of Beatrice Cenci. But 'restless anatomizing casuistry' hints at the difficulty of doing so, given the facts of this case. 'Casuistry' was a form of moral reasoning often associated with the Jesuits and therefore considered especially doubtful by a Protestant sensibility. The moral reasoning that dissected the character of Beatrice in order to seek a final justification of her parricide, received its impulse primarily from the portrait's appearance of tenderness and innocence. In this, the question of 'appearance' seemed to be overlooked, as if the portrait simply told a visible and self-evident truth, a transparency in which the face was a sign for an underlying 'real innocence' that could not be doubted. The face *was* the truth, revealing an integrity and composure that resisted the 'anatomizing', disincarnating process of looking too closely at the facts of the case. The face insisted that at a fundamental level its beauty was connected to goodness.

Shelley identified this 'anatomizing' reasoning not only with readers of the Cenci story, however, but with the Cenci themselves. In Act Two of the play the prelate Orsino describes the family's dangerous capacity to see into, and through, themselves and other people:

'tis a trick of this same family  
 To analyze their own and other minds.  
 Such self-anatomy shall teach the will  
 Dangerous secrets: for it tempts our powers,  
 Knowing what must be thought, and may be done,  
 Into the depth of darkest purposes... [II.ii.11.108-13]

It is a 'trick' that aptly describes the play's own daring to press the taboos of theatrical representation, and it is one most potently possessed by Beatrice herself, again as Orsino describes it:

Her subtle mind, her awe-inspiring gaze  
 Whose beams anatomize me nerve by nerve  
 And lay me bare, and make me blush to see  
 My hidden thoughts. [I.iii.84-7]

Beatrice's gaze, in other words, makes inner motive and desire transparent in others, at least to themselves, and this laying bare further stimulates desire for her. But Beatrice presents her own transparency of motive as a direct correlative of her innocent countenance. The transparency in which lurking motives are revealed in others is contrasted with her own transparency, in which no secret motive mars the picture. After the murder of her father, and in response to her stepmother and co-conspirator Lucretia's fear of self-incrimination, Beatrice proclaims that the appearance of innocence can only be read in one way:

She cannot know how well the supine slaves  
 Of blind authority read the truth of things  
 When written on a brow of guilelessness:  
 She sees not yet triumphant Innocence  
 Stand at the judgement-seat of mortal man,  
 A judge and accuser of the wrong  
 Which drags it there. [V.i.11.181-7].

It is not clear whether she means that she will be able to trick the authorities by keeping up an innocent appearance, or, that her innocence can never fail to *appear*, even to them. In fact, it is never established whether, or in exactly what sense, Shelley's Beatrice thinks of herself as innocent in the final act of the play; to what extent she relies on an appearance of guilelessness to act as its own proof, or how far she convinces herself of this simple equivalence. A restless, anatomizing casuistry is hers until the very end, but the pathos of her character has its source in the picture; it is, in fact, entirely based upon Shelley's memory of the effect of Guido Reni's portrait. What is encountered in the picture is both a penetrating gaze that sees through and into the observer, a look of profound experience, *and* a look of simple innocence: the moral paradox is somehow declared in the image.

The dilemma of how Beatrice appeared to herself, and of how her look was able to 'anatomize' others, would also fascinate Nathaniel Hawthorne, who twice visited the 'dreadful pit' in the Castel San Angelo where she had been imprisoned. <sup>(13)</sup> His reaction to the portrait, then in the Palazzo Barberini, in February 1858, was an intense one. The *French and Italian Notebooks* have two separate extended descriptions, of which this is the first:

[As] regards Beatrice Cenci, I might as well not try to say anything, for its spell is indefinable, and the painter has wrought it in a way more like magic than anything else I have known. It is a very youthful, girlish, perfectly beautiful face, with white drapery all around it, and quite enveloping the form. One or two locks of auburn hair stray out. The eyes are large and brown, and meet those of the spectator; and there is, I think, a little red about the eyelids, but it is very slightly indicated. The whole face is perfectly quiet; no distortion nor disturbance of any single feature; nor can I see why it should not be cheerful, nor why an imperceptible touch of the painter's brush should not suffice to brighten it into joyousness. Yet it is the very saddest picture that ever was painted, or conceived; there is an unfathomable depth of sorrow in the eyes; the sense of it comes by a sort of intuition. It is a sorrow that removes her out of the sphere of humanity; and yet she looks so innocent, that you feel as if it were only this sorrow, with its weight and darkness, that keeps her down upon the earth and brings her within our reach at all. She is like a fallen angel, fallen, without sin. It is infinitely

pitiful to meet her eyes, and feel that nothing can be done to help or comfort her; not that she appeals to you for help and comfort, but is more conscious than we can be that there is none in reserve for her. It is the most profoundly wrought picture in the world; no artist did it, or could do it again. Guido must have held the brush, but he painted better than he knew. I wish, however, it were possible for some spectator, of deep sensibility, to see the picture without knowing anything of its subject or history; for no doubt we bring all our knowledge of the Cenci tragedy to the interpretation of the picture.<sup>(14)</sup>

‘I hated to leave the picture’, Hawthorne would record of his second visit in 1859; ‘and yet was glad when I had taken my last glimpse, because it so perplexed and troubled me not to be able to get hold of its secret’.<sup>(15)</sup> Melville would describe the same perplexity, of ‘the suggested fanciful anomaly of so sweetly and seraphically *blonde* a being, being double-hooded, as it were, by the black crape of the two most horrible crimes (of one of which she is the object, and of the other the agent) possible to civilized humanity – incest and parricide’.<sup>(16)</sup> Again his terms translate the pictorial contrast of blonde-and-black into a moral enigma or anomaly. The assumption that being the victim of rape conferred a dark stigma, only deepens the perceived anomaly.

The portrait of Beatrice plays a central role in Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* (1860), published in England under the more interesting title of *The Transformation*. It is one of a number of works of art with which characters seem to exchange or share resemblances and identities during the course of the novel, and several different ekphrastic readings of the portrait seek to explain its effect. I would suggest, in fact, that the encounter with the face of Beatrice Cenci crystallises a central question in the practice of *ekphrasis* concerning the idea of reading pictures as moral or theological statements. Critics of Hawthorne’s novel have found something to dislike about all four of its central characters (Hilda, Miriam, Kenyon and Donatello), but the ‘innocent’ Hilda has proved particularly easy to satirize.<sup>(17)</sup> Permanently attired in white, living in a Gothic tower in Rome where she tends a shrine to the Virgin, attended by doves who seem sensitive to her moods, Hilda is ‘the most insistent exaggeration of purity in all of [Hawthorne’s] fiction’, as Frederick Crews put it.<sup>(18)</sup> (And this in a body of fiction not afraid to exaggerate purity). Despite, or perhaps because of this purity, she has



managed to attain a high level of skill as a copyist of the Old Masters. Her method resembles a type of automatism that seems half mechanical and half magical, something akin to Holgrove's daguerreotypism in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), and to the kind of artistry Hawthorne attributed to Guido Reni. As she is unable to persuade the Prince Barberini to allow her to copy Reni's Beatrice portrait on the spot, she has sat before the picture 'day after day, and let it sink into [her] heart', until it 'is now photographed there'[p.52].<sup>(19)</sup> The resultant copy, according to her friend Miriam (who is a rather more individualistic painter), is 'Guido's very Beatrice'. Miriam, who bears a burden of guilt from her past that is subtly communicated while never really being fully explicated, asks Hilda whether she "can interpret what the feeling is, that gives this picture such a mysterious force?" Hilda answers that while painting Beatrice Cenci she felt all the time that she [Beatrice] was "trying to escape from my gaze":

"She knows her sorrow is so strange, and so immense, that she ought to be solitary forever, both for the world's sake and her own...She is a fallen angel, fallen, and yet sinless; and it is only this depth of sorrow, with its weight and darkness, that keeps her down upon earth, and brings her within our view even while it sets her beyond our reach."[pp.52-3]

Miriam, however, questions this notion of sinlessness, arguing that Beatrice's 'own conscience does not acquit her of something evil, and never to be forgiven'. But then she seems to change her mind:

Beatrice's sin may not have been so great; perhaps it was no sin at all, but the best virtue possible in the circumstances. If she viewed it as a sin, it may have been because her nature was too feeble for the fate imposed upon her. Ah...if I could only get within her consciousness! If I could clasp Beatrice Cenci's ghost, and draw it into myself! I would give my life to know whether she thought herself innocent, or the one great criminal since time began![53]

This sounds like the 'casuistry' with which Beatrice's crime, according to Shelley, is justified: that it is *the best virtue in the circumstances*. And in a sense it is the same problem Shelley wrestled with in the final act of his drama – to get within Beatrice's own consciousness of herself, whether this is a

state of false consciousness, of self-deception, or not. But the effort to get within her consciousness is really an effort to interpret the mysterious opacity of the Reni portrait, the sense of a pictorial *chiaroscuro* or contrast of light and darkness denoting a particular kind of moral complexity. Behind this lies a particular assumption about the encounter between language and pictures, what Roland Barthes described as a ‘conception of the image as an area of resistance to meaning’.<sup>(20)</sup> The encounter between word and image produces a fundamental resistance which tends to be interpreted in favour of pictures, that is, it is taken as an index of the image’s ability better to express what lies beyond the limits of verbal explication. But this resistance in turn invites and facilitates a compensatory excess of language, in this case in the form of a casuistical reasoning, working to justify what cannot perhaps be justified, and always falling short of the expressive capacity of the portrait. Miriam’s own reasoning certainly recalls the masculine efforts of Shelley’s readers to justify Beatrice in terms of moral argument, and for many commentators the very urge to penetrate the ‘mystery’ of the portrait has a solidly masculine source. In the simple gendered paradigm sometimes adduced in theoretical accounts of *ekphrasis*, in which (male) language seeks to violate the repose, the passivity of the (female) image, one way of accounting for the fascination with the Cenci story among male writers would be to expose the kind of psychic disguise that is involved in the evocation of feminine ‘mystery’, or of places that evade the analysis of the mind, as one of sexual desire. Nineteenth-century gentlemen have thus merely been seduced by what Edith Wharton called ‘the pink-eyed smirk of the turbaned Beatrice’; they have fallen in love in some devilish way, or been unconsciously sexually stimulated by the association with the story of incest.<sup>(21)</sup> ‘The Cenci tragedy’ as Jeffrey Meyers writes, ‘personified in the portrait that transformed the incest, parricide, prison and torture of the haggard Beatrice into the sexually exciting image of a violated virgin, had an enormous attraction’.<sup>(22)</sup> If we accept this line of argument, Beatrice is violated again, so to speak, in the penetrative impulse of a moral reasoning that seeks justification for its own desire. Sympathy, far from being a benevolent impulse, emerges as a further aggression upon her person, a sublimation of desire, a return of her anatomizing stare: stripping, denuding, possessing. Desire in this sense explains the ‘mysterious’ metamorphosis through which she is transfigured, by which she becomes radiant – sexual – set like a jewel against her own darkness.<sup>(23)</sup>

Certainly, to a modern reader of Shelley's drama, there may well be a sense in which the hints and euphemisms, the trailing ellipses and refusals to name the incestuous rape directly, seem doomed to produce (even if they are not motivated by) something like titillation – though this may also be a consequence of our inability to experience the finer quality of testing the strength of the taboo of naming such deeds on the nineteenth-century stage. The 'desperate anxiety' of *The Marble Faun* might only too obviously be read as both concealing and revealing a fear of female sexuality, symbolised in the Cenci story.<sup>(24)</sup> Such an appeal to the seductiveness of the image of Beatrice, however, merely leaves us stranded in the circularity of desire and its sublimated images. In Hawthorne's fiction the assumption that desire is the real or given, and that representation is the imaginary, is always, at the very least, a simplification.

The semiotic question is a fundamental one, in this case between the intrinsic quality of innocence and its extrinsic sign (the face of innocence). The fact that we are concerned with portraiture, with a face, makes it especially complex, because the face is a figure for a particularly direct and immediate visual modality (indeed for the idea of unmediated encounter), *and* for the mask or appearance, the sign or cipher, which functions as a primary layer of disguise. In the nineteenth century the pseudo-sciences of physiognomy and phrenology made of face-reading a literalist obsession, something of course that filters through the literature of the period - whether in forms of scepticism or of credulity. It would be a mistake to assume that post-nineteenth-century readers have moved beyond the assumption that the face is there to be deciphered. Conceptualising a quality or a phenomenon through evocation of its 'face' (*the face of innocence, the face of suffering*), is to employ a basic metaphor for understanding how that phenomenon orients itself towards the world, how it is encountered and contemplated, and how it desires to be met. Innocence orients itself towards the world in the face of Beatrice Cenci, as painted by Reni, we might say.<sup>(25)</sup> At the same time, the fact that the face evokes the opposite sense, of the mask or the apparition, makes the simple assertion of a transparency between Beatrice's face and her innocence problematic. Hawthorne's novels and stories are haunted by faces that are dark, indistinct, unfathomable, misidentified, sometimes veiled or absolutely withheld from view.<sup>(26)</sup> Anxiety over their true nature reveals the grip they have upon an imagination

which worried about the effect of bringing knowledge of Beatrice's story to the image, and which finally turned away from Guido's picture at the Palazzo Barberini with relief. In Hawthorne's writing, with his particular sensitivity to the phantomatic - what Henry James described as his 'miasmatic conscience' - we always return to the fundamentally ambiguous nature of figuration, which is at its most essential, and therefore most dangerous, in the face-to-face encounter.<sup>(27)</sup> The shadowy repertoire of 'forms' ('appearances', 'apparitions', 'figures') reached deep into Hawthorne's Puritan consciousness and memory, going back to the sense of guilt he examined in his art in relation to his ancestors' involvement in the Salem witch-trials, in which the evidentiary case against the defendants often rested upon an appeal to such forms. Perhaps no other writer in the nineteenth century was so troubled and excited by the notion of 'appearance'.<sup>(28)</sup>

One strand of the novel wants to suggest that looking into Beatrice Cenci's face requires a particular courage; that there is a demand to be met in her look, which is not easily met nor easily understood, and which is analogous to those other moments when characters force themselves to look into the face of evil. At the same time the novel shrinks from the full acknowledgment of such a look, preferring to return to the notion of 'purity', the mechanical reproduction or faithful copy, which it associates with Hilda. Thrown into despair when she witnesses the murder of the Model by Donatello, and certain that she has also witnessed Miriam's complicity in that murder, Hilda returns to her tower and notices in a mirror placed beside the Cenci portrait that her own face has begun to resemble that of Beatrice's. "Am I, too, stained with guilt?", she asks herself, in a dramatic moment Oscar Wilde would clearly absorb and in a sense repeat in reverse in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Hawthorne seems compelled to answer her in his own voice:

Not so, thank Heaven! But, as regards Beatrice's picture, the incident suggests a theory which may account for its unutterable grief and mysterious shadow of guilt, without detracting from the purity which we love to attribute to that ill-fated girl. Who, indeed, can look at that mouth – with its lips half-apart, as innocent as a baby's that has been crying – and not pronounce Beatrice sinless! It was the intimate consciousness of her father's sin that threw its shadow over her, and frightened her into a remote and inaccessible region, where no sympathy could

come. It was the knowledge of Miriam's guilt that lent the same expression to Hilda's face.[160]

The argument here is, in one sense, simply a way of acknowledging the vulnerability of innocence to evil – the shadow of sin thrown by one over the other. But Hawthorne's intervention seems again to want either to forget, or to annul, the evil of Beatrice's conspiracy to murder, whilst at the same time remaining ambivalent about the guilt attached to the victim of rape. Miriam's understanding of Beatrice rests upon what the novel intermittently offers as the more radical notion of recognition. To look into the face of sin as Miriam does, is to recognise one's own part, not merely in the sense that one becomes tainted or stained, but in acknowledgment of an original co-presence there. It is a form of intimate consciousness, of inner resemblance, that is not simply a passive receptiveness to the shadow of another, but an active and participatory encounter. This order of recognition may therefore result in judging the sin differently, and more mercifully. But it also approaches the threshold of a radical antinomianism, the daring of Shelley's *The Cenci*, in which moral judgements have been conspicuously reversed, and in which the 'will' has been taught 'dangerous secrets'. Hawthorne's imagination is drawn to and repelled by this position, against which he instinctively grasps at the notion of a counterbalancing purity. He consequently has difficulty deciding what there is to see in the Beatrice Cenci portrait. He wants to read there both an original innocence, *and* an innocence regained or redeemed. The first kind has never known sin, while the second seems to know some mysterious secret about the meaning of sin that cannot easily be grasped or told, one in which sin has been transfigured - the final effect of the Guido Reni portrait.

These kinds of incompatibilities are sometimes attributed to the book's supposedly 'characteristic tone of having it both ways', although it would be more generous to describe them as ambiguities.<sup>(29)</sup> Hawthorne's attraction to ambiguities has long been identified as central to his work, most famously in Matthiessen's exposition of the 'device of multiple choice', and in Ivor Winters' 'formula of alternative possibilities'.<sup>(30)</sup> Harry Levin had described 'ambiguity' as 'the essential condition of Hawthorne's *belief*' (my italic), and Frederick Crews outlined what he called the 'timid ambiguity' and the 'gloomy ambivalence' of *The Marble Faun*.<sup>(31)</sup> Trying to translate the ambiguity of the Reni

portrait into a moral argument, however, has the potential to lead in contrasting directions. One way is to the kind of relativism voiced late in Hawthorne's novel by Kenyon (whose statements frequently seem fatuous):

Ah, Hilda...you do not know (for you could never learn it from your own heart, which is all purity and rectitude) what a mixture of good there may be in things evil; and how the greatest criminal, if you look at his conduct from his own point of view, or from any side-point, may seem not so unquestionably guilty, after all.[298]

The 'side-point', the 'new line of sight', is precisely what is at issue in Reni's *chiaroscuro*, and what is most difficult to define about the portrait. But there is something appropriately flat in Kenyon's 'after all' that suggests the easy slipperiness of evading a direct look at evil, or of suspending judgement in a generalised, oblique sympathy. Hawthorne was never prepared to give up the question of final moral evaluation and judgement, and would not be satisfied with abandoning the problem to relativism or casuistry. The most pressing question, then, is whether there is a meaningful moral content to the transfiguration attested to by viewers of Beatrice's portrait: how the darkness of her sin and of her suffering is somehow redeemed in the light of her nature.

One way of resolving this ambiguity would be to privilege the aesthetic category itself as a mode of real transformation, one in which moral darkness is somehow changed through the processes of Art. (Changed and finally redeemed.) Great artists such as Guido Reni, then, are able to transmute the substance of their flawed material into a kind of spiritualised gold. This is the basis of the reading of Hawthorne offered by Henry James, particularly in James's objections to the argument of Emile Montégut that Hawthorne was a *romancier pessimiste*.<sup>(32)</sup> James insisted instead that Hawthorne had inherited the old Puritan consciousness of sin, that he had been 'haunted' by the 'urgent conscience', but that he had inherited these things 'minus the conviction':<sup>(33)</sup>

The old Puritan moral sense, the consciousness of sin and hell, of the fearful nature of our responsibilities and the savage character of our Taskmaster – these things had been lodged in the mind of a man of Fancy, whose fancy had straightway begun to take liberties and play

tricks with them – to judge them (Heaven forgive him!) from the poetic and aesthetic point of view, the point of view of entertainment and irony. This absence of conviction makes the difference; but the difference is great.<sup>(34)</sup>

For James, then, there was something ‘insincere’ in Hawthorne’s handling of the themes of sin and sorrow. Hawthorne ‘contrived, by an exquisite process, best known to himself, to transmute this heavy moral burden into the very substance of the imagination, to make it evaporate in the light and charming fumes of artistic production’.<sup>(35)</sup> The ‘aesthetic point of view’ in this account is inherently a position of irony, one in which a single moral centre is always rejected. Beatrice’s sin and suffering are therefore transmuted (or, in the sense of Hawthorne’s original title, transformed) into the finer material of beauty, which loosens and softens her moral outline, altering her substance, and neutralising her participation in evil. Her portrait shines with the light of this transmutation.

As a larger conception of Hawthorne as an artist, the subordination of the moral category to the aesthetic is an argument for the creative sovereignty of the relativist ‘side-view’, and James’s own fiction has a clear investment in this mode. But in its view of Hawthorne as light and airy and charming, it was never an entirely persuasive thesis. James simplifies both the complex relationship Hawthorne had with his Puritan inheritance, and the deeply ambivalent view he held of art and the artist. A different way of approaching the problem would be to accept both the primacy and authenticity of the moral question, and then to position Beatrice in relation to the larger, much discussed and often confused question of the ‘Fortunate Fall’. This is normally considered in relation to Donatello and his psychomachia, the spiritual and moral awakening from ‘Marble Faun’ to suffering man, but it may also be usefully applied to Beatrice. As a theological paradigm for the transmutation of darkness into light it has an obvious analogy with the aesthetic effect attributed to the Reni portrait. There are two significant moments towards the end of the novel when the doctrine is given provisional outline. The first is by Miriam:

“Was that very sin – into which Adam precipitated himself and all his race – was it the destined means by which, over a long pathway of toil and sorrow, we are to attain a higher,

brighter, and profounder happiness, than our lost birthright gave? Will not this idea account for the permitted existence of sin, as no other theory can?"[337]

The other is by Kenyon:

"Is Sin, then – which we deem such a dreadful blackness in the Universe – is it, like Sorrow, merely an element of human education, through which we struggle to a higher and purer state than we could otherwise have attained. Did Adam fall, that we might ultimately rise to a far loftier Paradise than his?"[356-7]

The philosophical and theological arguments against the notion of the Fortunate Fall are too various to be summarised here, but one obvious point to be made, and one immediately grasped by Hilda, is that it seems to allow for an essential ambiguity in the way sin is evaluated – *ultimately* (and 'ultimately' is as exposed a term as Kenyon's 'after all').<sup>(36)</sup> Is the presence of sin in the world a good or a bad thing, ultimately? And how would that 'ultimate' answer affect the present? It is the position of confusion that Milton's Adam finds himself articulating in book twelve of *Paradise Lost*, when, in Arthur Lovejoy's phrase, he 'expresses a serious doubt whether his primal sin...was not, after all, rather a ground for self-congratulation'.<sup>(37)</sup>

O Goodness infinite, Goodness immense,  
That all this good of evil shall produce,  
And evil turn to good – more wonderful  
Than that which by creation first brought forth  
Light out of darkness! Full of doubt I stand,  
Whether I should repent me now of sin  
By me done and occasioned, or rejoice  
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring. (XII, ll.469-76)

In a doctrinal sense, the concept of the 'Fortunate Fall' was certainly not a way to justify crimes; it did not alter the notion of what constituted a sin, but referred to the significance of sin in the fullness of time, at the end of time; and so Hawthorne would absolutely *not* have seen Beatrice's parricide as in



any way ‘happy’ in the sense (Miriam’s sense perhaps) that she had simply got rid of a violent murderer. Sin and guilt were an active stimulus to the fuller manifestation of God’s grace and mercy, and the ‘dangerous secret’ that in a moral sense everything was permitted, would be, from a Christian point of view, the wrong lesson to learn. Nevertheless, observers of Beatrice’s face perhaps stand in an analogous state of confusion as to whether this is a picture of darkness, or one in which we somehow *ultimately* witness the emergence of a redemptive ‘light out of darkness’. Every *ekphrasis* of the picture that interprets the formal *chiaroscuro* as a moral argument, is, in effect, drawing upon this sense of the emergence of light in the Christian schema of redemption. The difficulty lies in relaying the effect of an ultimate good to the temporal present. Even if we allow ourselves to be persuaded by the reasoning that aims to justify her parricide – as a contingent necessity, in which good comes out of evil -we must still face the fact of her terrible suffering and her sorrow. How is the darkness of that suffering made good? Is it the case that a painting, with its resistance to the temporal and linear explications of language, better functions as a signifier of that ultimate destination of the *finally* made-good? Or is this somehow to be deceived by the image?

There is a fundamental distinction to be made between the notion of suffering as a kind of educative discipline - that there are types of suffering through which our natures are deepened or humanised (so that ‘trouble is the next best thing to enjoyment’, as Hawthorne would inform Longfellow); and the idea that radical evil will turn out to be a providential good, in the long run. Hawthorne was certainly aware of the difference, but it is perhaps the blurring of these notions that causes the uneasiness many readers have felt with the final chapters of *The Marble Faun*, and which is embodied in the *ekphrases* of the Reni portrait.<sup>(38)</sup> A powerful objection to the enunciation of *felix culpa* of which Hawthorne seems closely conscious, however, is precisely that it is ‘a line of reasoning’.<sup>(39)</sup> As such it cannot do justice to the nature of its subject. It fails as a summary of a knowledge that can only be gained in deep, extended time (‘over a long pathway of toil and suffering’), through purgatorial experience. Any formulation as a moral proposition or statement, as a justification of the ‘permitted’ place of sin and suffering in the universe, inevitably feels like a determination to have it both ways. As a consequence, it might seem that the ‘theory’ (Miriam’s word for it) is best left unexpressed (perhaps unviolated) by

the casuistry of verbal explanation. Hawthorne's insistence that Beatrice appears to be in a 'remote and inaccessible region', that she is 'removed... from the sphere of humanity... in a far-off region', acknowledges this difficulty. But although the mystery of what is in her consciousness is hidden from explication, it may, Hawthorne believed, be partly intuited through the encounter with her picture. In a theological sense, such an emphasis raises the image above the word in terms of its affective capacity to convey certain forms of spiritual reality, and it does so in a way that counters the traditional division of spatial art and temporal literature. A picture is able to offer us a sign of the most extended and mysterious results hidden within the longest processes of time; it is a type of fore-seeing or providential imaging.

Hawthorne's imagination, however, could not rest in this exalted idea of the artwork, this quasi-mystical notion of images. He looked beyond it for the sustaining light of which pictures were only ever partial refractions. In his writing, the trope of light and its various intensities is arguably *the* pervasive figure. Behind the face and from within the body rise degrees of light and levels of illumination met by and modifying depths of shadow. These properties signal the waxing and waning of understanding, they measure degrees of truth or falsehood, they calibrate emotion and make manifest spiritual realities.<sup>(40)</sup> Through the trope of light-as-truth, Hawthorne was drawn to the paradox of a convergence of the visible and the invisible, compelled to think through to the very limits of light, and to the limits of the figure of light. There are passages in *The Marble Faun* in which Hawthorne ruminates upon the possibility of an afterlife in which a perfect transparency is the condition of bliss. On their wanderings through Tuscany and Umbria, the sculptor Kenyon and his companion Donatello discuss the merits of stained-glass windows:

"There is no other such true symbol of the glories of the better world, where a celestial radiance will be inherent in all things and persons, and render each continually transparent to the sight of all... and perhaps this is to be the punishment of sin...Not that it shall be made evident to the Universe, (which can profit nothing by such knowledge,) but that it shall insulate the sinner from all sweet society by rendering him impermeable to light, and therefore unrecognisable in the abode of heavenly simplicity and truth".[238]

Hawthorne took comfort in the metaphor in his *Notebook*, where he observed of himself:

A cloudy veil stretches across the abyss of my nature. I have, however, no love of secrecy and darkness. I am glad, to think that God sees through my heart, and if any angel has power to penetrate it, he is welcome to know everything that is there.<sup>(41)</sup>

As Kenyon imagines it, we get a strong sense of a Puritan legacy, the hankering after a pure radiance, unstained and unmediated, not refracted or turned awry through intercession or interposition of any kind. When Hilda succumbs to the urge to make a confession in St. Peter's, Kenyon is quick to remind her of "the pure, white light of Heaven!" (Hilda adds: "I love the white light too!") And in her rejection of Miriam, Hilda appeals to the same idea:

"Your powerful magnetism would be too much for me. The pure, white atmosphere, in which I try to discern what things are good, and true, would be discoloured".

'White light' is both the essence and the obliteration of the visual. It is the annihilation of appearance, the cancelling of all form in a final, total visibility, in which there are no objects to see. This may be hostile to artistic representation and aesthetic form – Hawthorne had famously called for the frescoes of Giotto and Cimabue to be whitewashed over, and the Elgin marbles to be burned into lime. But it may also be a kind of apotheosis for such things. Hawthorne could never make up his mind about this. Photophilia and photophobia, iconophobia and iconophilia, converge at their limit, but it is a limit beyond all representation, whether verbal or visual. White radiance is heralded in the famous final sentence of the novel when Hilda is said to see 'sunlight on the mountain-tops'. Just before that, the narrator has speculated as to the whereabouts of Hilda in the two days during which she goes missing (we eventually learn that she has been sheltered in the Cenci Palace). He suggests that she has been snatched away to a 'Land of Picture', where 'Guido had shown her another portrait of Beatrice Cenci, done from the celestial life, in which the forlorn mystery of the earthly countenance was exchanged for a radiant joy'. [351]

The 'Land of Picture' is an extraordinary fantasy, an apotheosis of the museum that betokens the emptiness of all earthly picture-galleries. Only there, is the face of Beatrice Cenci wholly transfigured; which is to say, outside the narrative and history of Beatrice, over and against the reality of Guido Reni's portrait, beyond the Roman context, outside *ekphrasis* – only there, could Hawthorne conceive a portrait in which she both is, and is not herself. The *chiaroscuro* of the Reni portrait has been 'exchanged' for the radiance of the celestial life. Sin and suffering have been whitewashed. This would be a portrait gallery in which the possibility of misidentification had ceased, because the possibility of description was over.

### Endnotes:

[1] For a good summary of the history of the Cenci, and of the portrait's reputation and provenance theories, see Louise K. Barnett, 'American Novelists and the "Portrait of Beatrice Cenci"', *The New England Quarterly*, 53:2 (June, 1980), 168-183. For most of the nineteenth century, the portrait was (in the words of Stuart Curran), 'one of the most famous attractions of Rome; reproduced ubiquitously, the portrait was hardly less compelling to visitors than the Bernini fountains or the Sistine frescoes'. Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p.xi. [For the sake of ease I will refer to the portrait as of Beatrice Cenci by Guido Reni.]

[2] Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) (London: Penguin, 1984), p.316.

[3] Hippolyte Taine, *Italy: Naples and Rome*, translated by J.Durand (London, 1867), p.233.

[4] Herman Melville, *Pierre or The Ambiguities* (1852) (London: Penguin, 1996), p.351.

- [5] Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* (1846) (London: Penguin, 1998), p.148.
- [6] *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), pp.239-40. Belinda Jack comments upon the likeness between the Amelia Curran portrait of Shelley (commissioned whilst he was writing *The Cenci* in 1819), and the Guido portrait, which was copied by Curran for the frontispiece of the first edition of the play in 1820. Belinda Jack, *Beatrice's Spell: The Enduring Legacy of Beatrice Cenci* (New York: Other Press, 2005), p.57.
- [7] Jay Leda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819-1891* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), II, 557.
- [8] Stendhal, quoted in Bruce Hayley, *Living Forms: Romantics and the Monumental Figure* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p.203.
- [9] Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, p.147-8.
- [10] Thomas De Quincey, 'Percy Bysshe Shelley', *Works of Thomas De Quincey* (Edinburgh: Black), V, p.28.
- [11] *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p.240.
- [12] *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p.238.
- [13] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *French and Italian Notebooks*, ed. Thomas Woodson, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1980), XIV, p.143. [Hereafter, *WNH*].
- [14] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *French and Italian Notebooks*, *WNH*, XIV, p.92-3.
- [15] *WNH*, XIV, p.521.
- [16] Melville, *Pierre*, p.351.
- [17] See, for example, the account given by F.O. Matthiessen in *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: OUP, 1941).

[18] Frederick Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p.217.

[19] All quotations from *The Marble Faun* (London: Penguin, 2002), will follow in brackets. Useful for my purposes have been the following essays: Paul Brodtkorb, 'Art Allegory in *The Marble Faun*', *PMLA* 77 (1962), 254-67; Spencer Hall, 'Beatrice Cenci: Symbol and Vision in *The Marble Faun*', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 25 (1970), 85-95; Jonathan Auerbach, 'Executing the Model: Painting, Sculpture and Romance-Writing in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*', *English Literature and History* 47 (1980), 103-120; Timothy Sweet, 'Photography and the Museum of Rome in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*', *Photo-Textualities: Reading Photographs and Literature*, ed. Marsha Bryant (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), pp.25-42. Millicent Bell, '*The Marble Faun* and the Waste of History', *Southern Review*, 35:2 (1999), 354-70; Fritz Gysin, 'Paintings in the house of fiction; the example of Hawthorne', *Word & Image* 5:2 (April-June 1989), 159-72

[20] Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p.32.

[21] Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, (1911) (London: Penguin, 1985), p.53. In Belinda Jack's opinion, Shelley 'fell in love with the portrait', and projected his own sadistic impulses onto the character of Francesco Cenci. *Beatrice's Spell*, p.80.

[22] Jeffrey Meyers, *Painting and the Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), p.11.

[23] Louise Barnett has described the sexualisation of copies of the Beatrice portrait: 'A Beatrice with exposed shoulders and cleavage was not unusual'. Louise Barnett, 'American Novelists and the "Portrait of Beatrice Cenci"', *The New England Quarterly*, 53:2 (1980), 176.

[24] The phrase is from Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p.242.

[25] I am thinking here particularly of the well-known passages of *Totality and Infinity* (1969) espousing an 'ethics of the face'. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp.194-212, reprinted in Dermot Moran and

Timothy Mooney (eds.), *The Phenomenology Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p.516; 519.

[26] One of the most striking examples from many would be ‘The Veiled Lady’ (Priscilla) of *The Blithedale Romance*, ‘a phenomenon in the mesmeric line’. Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1998), p.5.

[27] Henry James, *Hawthorne* (1879) (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), p.92.

[28] See Graham Clarke, ‘To Transform and Transfigure: The Aesthetic Play of Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*’, in A. Robert Lee (ed.), *Nathaniel Hawthorne: New Critical Essays* (London: vision press, 1982), pp.131-147.

[29] David Howard, ‘The Fortunate Fall and Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*’, in *Romantic Mythologies*, ed. Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), pp.97-136. (p.101).

[30] Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, p.276. Ivor Winters, *In Defense of Reason* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p.170. Frederick Crews, *The Sins of the fathers*, p.215.

[31] Harry Levin, ‘Statues from Italy’, p.192. Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p.218.

[32] James, *Hawthorne*, p.47.

[33] James, *Hawthorne*, p.48.

[34] James, *Hawthorne*, p.46.

[35] James, *Hawthorne*, p.22.

[36] For a classic summary of the notion of the Fortunate Fall, see A.O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948), pp.277-295.

[37] Lovejoy, *Essays*, p.277.

[38] Quoted by Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, p.227.

[39] R.R.Male, *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (New York: Norton, 1964), p.176.

[40] Richard Harter Fogle concentrates on this dominant motif in *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light & the Dark* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952).

[41] Quoted by Matthiessen, p.266.